

The rhetorical move in William Shakespeare's Hamlet English literature essay

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to more easily define the rhetorical movere in relation with the second scene of Act II in Hamlet. It will first be shown what movere actually means and then the concept will be explored in the context of the above mentioned fragment from William Shakespeare's play. In the second part of the essay, the idea of a play within the play will be explored with the main argument that Hamlet himself acts a role towards everybody in his attempt to hide the secret of the murder of his father. His role will essentially influence everyone around him. The art of speech being one of the most important aspects in William Shakespeare's work, certain concepts of rhetoric can easily be translated into the plays of the great English dramatist. But first, what is rhetoric and with what is it relevant in relation with Shakespeare's plays? The most famous definition of rhetoric comes from Aristotle. He calls it 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion[1]'. Furthermore, Marcus Tullius Cicero identifies the purpose of rhetoric and this brings us to the key word of this paper. The term " movere" can be found in even the most basic concepts of rhetoric. Cicero regarded movere to be just one of the three goals of rhetoric. In order for rhetoric to even begin to be defined, one must first understand its purpose. Cicero believed that rhetoric had three goals – docere, delectare and movere[2]. Docere refers to the process of teaching. It is implied that the orator must be ready to teach, to instruct, to provide something new to his listeners through his speech. Delectare refers to the concepts of charming, delighting and pleasing the audience. Thus, besides instructing his listeners, the speaker must also be capable of fully capturing the crowd's attention and furthermore impress them. Finally, movere refers to an actual

movement. It implies the stirring of the audience. If the speaker manages to teach his audience, as well as to catch their attention, *move* represents the final step where the listeners are influenced, persuaded, convinced of the orator's words. There is also the matter of what an orator must be so that one can even be considered as such. These five aspects were first put together by Cicero in *De Inventione*. *De Inventione* basically represented a set of instructions designed for orators. Cicero names five canons that must exist in an orator. He names them – *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *pronuntiatio*[3]. Rhetorician Thomas Wilson explores this same concept in his work "An English Rhetoric". He names the same five canons that must exist in an orator[4] while also shedding light on what they represent: There's the invention of the matter – 'a searching out of things true or things likely, the which may reasonably set forth a matter and make it appear probable', followed by the disposition of the same – 'an apt bestowing and orderly placing of things, declaring where every argument shall be set, and in what manner every reason shall be applied, for confirmation of the purpose'. Next there is the elocution – 'an applying of apt words and sentences to the matter found out to confirm the cause', the memory – 'a fast holding both matter and words coupled together to confirm any cause' and last but not least, the utterance – 'a framing of the voice, countenance, and gesture after a comely manner'. William Shakespeare's tragedy – *Hamlet* is a remarkable piece of work that illustrates the well-known story of the Prince of Denmark. One of the many things that make *Hamlet* to be so memorable is its art of speech. The play is filled with many outstanding speeches, most given by the main character, Hamlet. It is what makes him such an

interesting and heavily explored protagonist. Shakespeare's use of these speeches fully contributes to drawing out the character of Hamlet. His simple uttering of the words will define more of him than all his actions in the play. For when the audience will judge Hamlet, they are less likely to judge him by his actions but more by his thoughts, feelings and words. It is fair to question why was the play of Hamlet written as it was. Why did Shakespeare give this character (and others throughout his work) the strong feelings and profound sensations that created this memorabilia in the conscience of English literature? Heinrich Platt provides an answer by bringing into the discussion the role of *actio*. *Actio* is a subtlety of the *pronuntiatio*/eloquence that both Cicero and Thomas Wilson identify and define. *Actio* is tied to the delivery of the speech by the aspects of hand gestures, voice variation, eye contact and engaging manner. The manner of how an actor (for actors were the so-called orators Shakespeare's time) delivers the *actio* is essential. It plays an important role in the Renaissance as it forms "not only an integral part of acting but comprises all arts: the theory of poetry as well as the theory of music and fine arts. That is why an artist has constantly to undergo new emotional transformations[5]". The second scene of Act II provides an interesting view on the play in relation with the concepts of rhetoric. By that moment in the story, we already know about the death of King Hamlet and how his brother Claudius took over the throne. Hamlet discovers the truth about what really happened to his father and now wants to test this by hiding the dreading scene in a play shown to Claudius. By watching his reaction, Hamlet hopes to be sure that his uncle really committed the murder as the ghost had told him. He finds the occasion shortly after. The

highlight of the second scene in Act II is provided by the arrival at Elsinore of a group of actors. Hamlet asks one of them to give a speech about the Fall of Troy and the death of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. He then asks the group if they could perform "The Murder of Gonzago" with an additional short speech added by the prince himself. The end of Act II is also this paper's main interest. In the scene-ending speech, Hamlet is angered. He is disappointed with himself and his lack of action regarding what he had learned about his father. He is impressed with the speech about the Fall of Troy and stands in awe of how easy the actor turned off his real feelings and metamorphosed into this character that really is affected by the fate of Priam and Hecuba, towards whom he would not have any particular affection. What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her? What would he do, Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have? He would drown the stage with tears And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, [6] (II. 2) Hamlet asks himself how the actor would react if his cause would be as true and as strong as the vengeance of his father is to him. The prince's frustration surrounding his lack of action will come to an end as he plans to disguise the murder of the king in the play. He will then follow Claudius' reaction and based on that he will decide if his uncle really committed the bloody deed. The peculiar thing about Hamlet's speech is that his frustration may not be entirely justified. What he does not seem to realize at that moment is that within the story, towards all of his acquaintances he also plays a part, from the moment he decided to act as if he was mad. He manages to become very convincing and practically moves with his performance every other character around him. He is observed by everyone

and accordingly everyone acts and feels different because of that. The play within the play is not only constituted by "The Murder of Gonzago" but also by Hamlet's feigned madness. In other words, the move that Hamlet believes he lacks is actually there and affects everyone more intensely than he would have believed. One must wonder if any of the dramatic events in the play may have happened without Hamlet's erratic behavior that he himself doesn't seem to recognize. Would Claudius have threatened his life if the play never happened? Would Ophelia have still committed suicide if Hamlet did not kill Polonius? Not likely. The role Hamlet assumes ignites the whole amount of conflict in the play subsequent to the death of the king. Alongside this hidden role, Hamlet acts also as a puppeteer. The way he plays with the feelings of others – from the emotions that he awakes in Claudius with the play, from the poisonous words that he throws towards Ophelia and Gertrude – all this lead these characters to an eventual death. But these puppets will also drag him to the same fate. Because of this erratic behavior, Hamlet stirs different feelings in all those around him. The question of his sanity being lost for good will inevitably come up in the mind of the reader also. If Hamlet really acts his madness, he acts almost too well and everything he does seems to turn into a loose cannon. However, the reader also gets important glimpses of Hamlet's true nature, the one that hides behind the mask everyone in the play sees. The scene at Ophelia's grave (V. 1) stands proof that Hamlet is not really mad but that he had merely taken the acting way too far. His tears are honest and his sadness sincere. These humane feelings remind the audience that his sanity is not all lost. It is interesting to observe the rational part of Hamlet's mind. At no point during the play does Hamlet

fully trust the ghost of his father. He manages to keep himself not too influenced by the supernatural force that inexplicably reveals the actual fate of the king. Though he wants to be driven by a new motive – vengeance, Hamlet acts fair and first wants to be sure that Claudius is indeed guilty and only after that will he seek justice. At some point during the second scene of Act II he really asks himself whether the apparition of his father is no more than an evil ghost. The spirit that I have seen May be the devil, and the devil hath power To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps Out of my weakness and my melancholy, As he is very potent with such spirits, Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds More relative than this: the play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.[7](II. 2) Bernard Lamy offers an interesting view in his 1676 work entitled *The Art Of Speaking* that "A painter will not lay on his Colours'till he has formed in his imagination what he designs to draw. Discourse is the Picture of our thoughts; the Tongue is the Pencil which draws that Picture; and Words are the Colours"[8]. By this analogy, we may consider the fact that Hamlet doesn't utter a word that he hadn't previously considered and thought about. No speaker as eloquent as Hamlet is will just randomly say such things, thus it is more likely that Hamlet's madness is merely feigned and whatever he is doing is nothing more than a masterfully designed play. Hamlet is not mad. He is but a cunning puppeteer. His uncle is his first puppet. Threatened by all the allusions that Hamlet throws at him, Claudius will try several times to kill Hamlet (IV. 3), only making himself to appear more guilty in the eyes of the vindictive prince. Hamlet's actions give birth to new dimensions of Claudius' wickedness. The prince witnesses a glimpse of repentance (III. 2) from the

new king when the latter begins to pray for the forgiveness of his sins but this remorse seems to vanish completely when Claudius later tries to murder Hamlet. Claudius may have committed an evil deed but it was one that tortured him deeply. Under the strain that the prince knows the truth, he is willing to do more despicable things in order for him to get away with what he has done. In other words, Hamlet forces Claudius to become an even greater villain. It can be fair to say that through his words, Hamlet brings some undeserved harsh words to his mother (III. 4). But what he manages to stir in her is somewhat different from all the others. When all seems lost and no one will stand by him, Gertrude will make the ultimate sacrifice by drinking the poisoned wine that was intended for her son (V. 2). One may argue that before that moment, Gertrude doesn't really appear to be a very motherly figure, in spite of Hamlet's fragile state of mind. But in the end, through his foolish, rushed, almost childish actions, it seems that Hamlet manages to get Gertrude be his mother again. It is fair to say that Hamlet's monologue from Act II, scene 2 in which he laments on how easily an actor can move an audience just by faking some feelings and in comparison how much of a coward he feels for not being able to take more action and express more feelings towards the vengeance of his father – all this may very well represent a great underestimation from Hamlet of his own capabilities to move, influence and almost decide the fates of all characters. Hamlet does not lack action. It's just his role. He is actually the greatest actor in the play and greatly surpasses the Fall of Troy performance. His vengeance spreads farther than he would have intended as he manages to change the fate of the whole Denmark. But what drives this vengeance?

Where does Hamlet's power of going on come from? Why are all of Hamlet's feelings so profound? An answer to these questions may be found behind the concept of *enargeia*. According to Quintilian, *enargeia* is what Cicero calls "illustration" and "evidentness". These notions refer to the moving of the feelings in such a way that rather than narration they represent a display of some sort. The feelings of anger and vengeance in the prince come from the power of move that the ghost's story has over him that makes the narration of Claudius' murder to become so vivid as if Hamlet was actually there. This sensation goes beyond Hamlet's own imagination and manages to enter the reader's too. As Hamlet sees his father dying, so are we. Quintilian names this – *enargeia*. He exemplifies with a rather eloquent illustration: I make a complaint that a man has been murdered; shall I not bring before my eyes everything that is likely to have happened when the murder occurred? Shall not the assassin suddenly sally forth? Shall not the other tremble, cry out, supplicate or flee? Shall I not behold the one striking, the other falling? Shall not the blood, and paleness, and last gasp of the expiring victim present itself fully to my mental view[9]? *Enargeia* means vividness; it's the idea that puts in motion the imagination with only the means of words. Words can be the only tool needed. Phillip Sidney follows a similar idea in his essay *The Defense of Poetry*: (...)for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul(...[10]). It is commonly believed that William Shakespeare drew his inspiration for Hamlet from a Scandinavian legend filled with some historical references[11]. It is something that he did for many of his plays

(take Macbeth or any other of his plays that are labeled as historical). History represents an important source for Shakespeare's work. However it is impressive how from mere legends and happenings that lack any kind of real characterization of their protagonists, Shakespeare managed to create myths of his own. These are myths that surpass the originals with their depth and unique insights in the minds of characters that remained recorded in history. Hundreds of books have been written on Hamlet in regard of numerous aspects. Hundreds more will still be written. Rhetoric represents an important and intriguing part of what we can take and analyze from this monster that has forever marked the English literature.